WP5.1.1.2 - An operational common framework for identifying disadvantaged student communities applicable in diverse European Universities

VIDEMŠEK, PETRA; GILLO-NILSSON, CATHERINE; SOBOČAN, ANA M.; VIGMO, SYLVI

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1. WP5.1: DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR INCLUSION OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENT COMMUNITIES

1.1. Aim (project proposal tasks)

In WP5 – Inclusion of the project "European Universities Transforming to an Open, Inclusive Academy for 2050" (EUTOPIA), the project proposal outlines the following aim:

We shall identify key disadvantaged student communities in each of the EUTOPIA universities. This will lead to a common yet contextualised EUTOPIA approach to identifying disadvantaged students on a Europe-wide basis. We shall conduct a comparative analysis of (i) legal frameworks, (ii) definitions and methods applied by universities, (iii) data concerning disadvantaged groups available at the various universities, with the aim of producing principles and practices for educational formats that facilitate inclusion as well as policy measures and tools for inclusion of targeted students and staff.

1.2. Process (methodology of the output)

To produce the operational common framework for identifying disadvantaged student communities applicable in diverse European Universities (one of the planned project outputs in WP5), a particular methodology was developed.

1.2.1. DEVELOPING A NEW APPROACH : INCLUSION INSTEAD OF DISADVANTAGE

Initially, all partners discussed the approach to creating the framework during the kick-off meeting in Ljubljana, Slovenia in the beginning of March 2020. The discussions resulted in a common view and decision, that to be able to address disadvantage, there must be a shift to viewing it from the perspective of inclusion. A view of the future University, aiming to completely minimize or even eliminate effects and experiences of disadvantage, is one that is committed to establish and maintain the university culture and processes as truly inclusive for all members. There is evidence that a lot can be gained if efforts are then focused on revitalizing institutional structures, as well as critically rethink and develop the institutional culture and learning environment.

 Current scientific literature also supports such a view. For example, Naylor and Mifsud (2020) suggest a structural inequality framework by identifying three types of structural inequality: (i) Vertical inequality focuses on how certain structures can disadvantage people and give them "fewer opportunities to access higher education" due to their particular traits and backgrounds (e.g. socio-economic, ethnic, disability) as well as the geographical space they belong to; (ii) Horizontal inequality is about how these groups can also be disadvantaged in terms of structures that limit their choices of careers and/or fields of study (e.g. underrepresented groups can be relatively over- represented in certain educational programs and highly under-represented in others, an exclusion of people with certain backgrounds in for example high- status programs); (iii) Internal inequality points towards how the culture and environment, design and implementation of educational programs, in other words the institution itself, can disadvantage groups with certain

backgrounds and characteristics (Naylor & Mifsud, 2020). Through their structural inequality approach and outcomes, Naylor & Mifsud (2020) then shift the focus from how particular [disadvantaged] student groups can assimilate to the University, to what the University can do to be accessible and inclusive to all its members (both students and staff), including the surrounding society.

1.2.2.DATA AND ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATE AT THE EUTOPIA UNIVERSITIES

Next, to understand the current practices and know-how, scan legal frameworks, definitions and methods applied by universities and collect data concerning disadvantaged groups, two project partners (UL and UG) devised and then consolidated with the other partners, three survey templates (see Appendix 1): survey on (disadvantaged) students, survey on (disadvantaged) staff and a survey on the definition of inclusion.

These surveys were used by all six universities to collect data that was subsequently analysed and fed into the document on "An operational common framework for identifying disadvantaged student communities applicable in diverse European Universities". The data collection was completed by August 2020, which also frames the currency of legislations, policies and practices. We understand these are regularly changing and our data records it up to August 2020.

Importantly, we included analysis of policies and practices also from the perspective of staff employed at the universities, as we recognize that to create a truly inclusive environment and minimize or eliminate disadvantage of students, also the staff should not be exposed to the exclusionary and disadvantageous practices: inclusion should be a practice in all spheres of the University, for all its members.

1.2.3.STRUCTURE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document (framework) is built on data from six EUTOPIA universities. The structure follows a unified form : in each section, first there is a short description of the issue, then we offer recommendations, based on the current best practice and insights following the collected data and last, we provide a list of related examples from the EUTOPIA universities. Detailed information on the examples, and all other data are included in the Appendix 1, which consists of the surveys.

The data analysis informed us that there are the following crucial points to discussing how to identify, monitor and address disadvantage at the University, and how to foster and monitor inclusion. These points are: legislation, processes, university bodies and actual actions.

In our analysis (and data collection) we first focused on the legislations, steering documents, guidelines and policies at the six universities, which has been pivotal in understanding what laws and principles govern higher education as well as what are the practices and strategies related to widening access and participation. All universities of course follow national anti- discrimination laws and other legislations relevant to higher educations, but usually they also develop and establish own principles and policies, that are even more specific and are directly targeting emerging issues and problems.

Legislation is a necessary prerequisite to identify and address, as well as prevent or eliminate contexts and practices that generate disadvantage and on the other hand support and enable inclusive practices and approaches. Our data shows, that not only the final documents, but also the processes of designing laws and policies are very relevant for creating inclusive environments – both from the perspective of actual participation of various stakeholders, as well as from the point of view of content – more varied contributions usually produce a wider scope, with more perspectives being included. In general, processes are important in view of inclusive cultures: different stakeholders (students, research and academic staff, external experts, people with experience …) should participate in all the different processes and decision-making at the university, such as policy design, curricula development, etc. To enable such participation as well as provide for implementation, monitoring, informing, research and development relevant for establishing and maintaining inclusion, specific university bodies, such as offices, working groups, committees etc. need to be set up and running, dedicated specifically to creating and supporting an inclusive culture and practices at the university. Inclusion should be mainstreamed, and be an underlying principle in all processes, bodies and laws at the university, nevertheless, currently still, specific, focused and dedicated attention should be given to inclusion in order to be implemented. Finally, this brings us to the last point – of actions. Inclusion principles should be actually implemented – having the laws, appropriate processes and needed bodies does not suffice. In this document, we shortly present how the six EUTOPIA universities are already implementing inclusive principles on the practical level and what actions they deem necessary, but more information again can be found in Appendices, while a further analysis of the actions will be provided in one of the following WP5 outputs on Best practices.

1.2.4. LINKED DOCUMENTS

Work in the WP5 consists of producing a series of outputs, that all complement each other and are interlinked. For example, in the next months, frameworks, road maps and reports will be produced, that will present best practices and other elements relevant to the goals and aims of this WP5 and the future universities. Therefore, also this present document should be read as a work in progress (which will also be updated and modified during the duration of the EUTOPIA Alliance project) and only one piece in a larger discussion about inclusion at the University.

1.2.5. CONLCUDING REMARKS

This document is based on the analysis of the current laws, approaches and practices at the six EUTOPIA universities, while it is directed to the future. We aim for university environments, where actually all its members will experience inclusion to such an extent, that specific measures and remedies will no longer be necessary.

2. Output: An operational common framework for identifying disadvantaged student communities applicable in diverse European Universities

2.1. DISADVANTAGE AND INCLUSION

Disadvantaged student communities can be best identified by measuring the level and scope of inclusion at the University.

Widening access and participation are to be a matter of responsibility for all functions and activities of the University.

Access and participation includes all levels and aspects of University life, and all should be scrutinized against principles of inclusion: from recruitment and retention, curricula development, learning opportunities and knowledge access, social, cultural, intellectual and sports life at the University.

2.1.1.DESCRIPTION OF DISADVANTAGE

Students and staff who lack experiencing inclusion[1] on the academic, social, cultural, language, spatial, structural level, for example, can be recognized as disadvantaged.

Disadvantage and inclusion are complicated and challenging concepts to define. Disadvantage happens in a specific context and structure that students and staff encounter. There are different patterns of disadvantage and disadvantaging. A system or structure could "disadvantage" a student while others are designed in such a way that he/she experiences that he/she has equitable opportunities and access to the same resources and activities as other students and staff in a comparable situation.

In different EUTOPIA Universities, disadvantaged students are described with different terms – students with special needs, students with special status, students with special educational needs etc. The aim for the future involves creating universally accessible and inclusive institutions in which students or staff do not require special treatment.

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[1] Please see Appendix (Collection of Definitions of Inclusion) for more discussion on what we understand by inclusion.

2.1.2. RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW TO ADDRESS DISADVANTAGE

To address and counter disadvantage, universities must create equitable opportunities and universal access circumstances, which expose and eliminate various forms of inequality, discrimination, bias etc.

Disadvantage might be both a result of discrimination and bias on the interpersonal level, as well as a result of structural inequality, unequal opportunities and limited access and participation.

The focus should be on various perspectives that can be of use for the university in its efforts to identify and remove disadvantage structures and promote a development of mainstreaming in all processes and environments to increase the experience of inclusion for all students as well as for all staff already identified as disadvantaged and the ones that are in risk to be as well.

2.1.3. EXAMPLES OF DISADVANTAGE/D

Universities in EUTOPIA follow wider anti-discrimination legislations, while they also establish own guidelines and recognize further vulnerabilities and causes of disadvantage. The following are statuses and circumstances that make people more vulnerable to structural and interpersonal effects of discrimination and unequal treatment and opportunities, as currently recognized and categorized by EUTOPIA universities; some are common in all universities, a few are unique and specific to particular universities.

Disability

Currently, in the six EUTOPIA universities legislations and policies, recognition of a status of disability usually involves one or more of the following impairments: long standing illness or health condition; a mental health condition; a physical impairment or mobility issues; coordination disorder; a social/communication impairment; a specific learning difficulty; blindness or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses; deafness or serious hearing impairment; general learning disability; autism spectrum disorder; development stutter; chronic and/or disabling medical conditions; exceptional circumstances involving hospitalizations etc.

Violence and harassment

Universities recognize persons experiencing sexual harassment; gender-based violence; LGBTI discrimination; victims of acts of terrorism.

Language, ethnicity, migration

Disadvantageous circumstances can also involve having a non-dominant ethnic background and/or being of the non-dominant (white) race; having a migration background; being a student newcomer; being a foreign-speaking student and/or an international student or staff.

Socio-economic status

Vulnerability linked with socio-economic status usually results from or intersects with various other statuses and circumstances (in other points of this section), but predominantly, the contexts involve: students who are care leavers; students from large families; students experiencing financial problems; students coming from schools with lower performance or from deprivileged and/or rural areas; carer(s)' educational background, students from neighbourhoods with low participation in education; and other disadvantageous socio-economic backgrounds.

Civil status

Particular civil statuses are recognized as possibly causing disadvantage as well, these involve students with a mandate as student representative; students who are civil servants, performing military activity or are voluntary firefighters. Students and staff shall not be discriminated due to their choice of unions or political convictions.

Other circumstances and statuses that create vulnerabilities

Age, gender identity and expression; gender reassignment; parental or family responsibilities, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief, student artists, students in professional sport; working students; re-entry students; students with non-traditional prior education; are examples of other circumstances and statuses that were identified in the six EUTOPIA universities as having impact on students' experiences of disadvantage / advantage and inclusion in higher education.

All of the above circumstances are not to be the decisive factors for the students' opportunities to access and complete higher education.

There is therefore an increasing body of evidence that universities need to pay attention to who the students are and embrace the diversity of needs as well as take advantage of the diverse resources that they bring in to the student community as well as the university as a workplace (in case of staff).

2.2. PRINCIPLES AND LEGISLATION

2.2.1.DESCRIPTION: LEGISLATION AS A PREREQUISITE

Acceptable and unacceptable practices, commitments, obligations etc. need to be described, adopted and generally disseminated and accessible in official documents, such as different laws, guidelines, plans, policies and codexes in order to be recognized as relevant and legitimate, and subsequently implemented, monitored, as well as continuously revisited, revised and improved.

EUTOPIA Universities support inclusion via an array of official documents that are produced by Universities themselves, while also complying to national and other laws and regulations on non-discrimination, violence prevention, access, disability rights, employment rights etc.

2.2.2. RECOMMENDATIONS: LEARNING FROM HOW LEGISLATION FRAMES DISADVANTAGE ACROSS EUTOPIA UNIVERSITIES

It is recognized that students (as well as staff) are facing multiple disadvantages, that these can as well arise at any time and that often these intersect and produce multiple venues of inequality and exclusion, therefore a number of legislative mechanisms need to be in place to ensure the highest possible levels of equality and inclusion. For legislations and coda to be efficient, they are ideally reached and developed in democratic processes (involving all stakeholders), ongoingly disseminated (all stakeholders are informed of rights and obligations), and regularly updated. Their implementation should be monitored and constantly improved (including necessary sanctions for violations and non-compliance), while stakeholders should also have access to complaints procedures.

Documents that support enhancing inclusion, involve documents: presenting legislations that prevent discrimination, describing measures and operations, outlining guiding values and principles etc. In short, relevant documents involve both those that are legally binding, as well as those that present strategies, visions and guiding ethical values. Considered goals and measures span across different dimensions, from institutional culture and values, to actual operations, services and practice, physical environment requirements, as well as information and communication.

2.2.3. EXAMPLES OF BINDING DOCUMENTS AND GUIDELINES

Examples of principles and values

EUTOPIA universities aim to follow a number of principles and values that they deem to be relevant to an inclusive and socially responsible academic institution. These are, for example: democracy, legality, objectivity, free formation of opinion, respect for all people´s equal value, freedom and dignity, efficiency and service, justice, equality, independence, plurality and solidarity, mainstreaming and commitment to participation.

The documents in the universities speak of, for example: quality teaching, proximity to students, aims of maximum internationalisation, social responsibility, sustainability and environmental awareness, ethical awareness, gender mainstreaming, importance of solidarity and cooperation, value of volunteering, prevention of health risk and promotion of a healthy lifestyle etc.

Examples of internal steering documents

At EUTOPIA Universities, relevant documents are differently structured and named, while aiming for similar principles of inclusion. Some examples include: Strategic plan (roadmap of institutional commitment to the University community and society); Inclusion plan (operational objectives, responsible agents and specific implementation and evaluation mechanisms are defined); Social

Responsibility plan (to carry out the joint strategy considering equal opportunities, cooperation and sustainability); Global prevention plan (presents measures and rights); Code of conduct (involves guidelines and commitments); Equality action plan (describes actions); Access and Participation Plan; Widening Participation (WP) Strategy (aims and ambitions for supporting disadvantaged students); Dignity at Warwick (designed to ensure that certain standards are maintained including challenging bullying and harassment).

2.3. PROCESSES

2.3.1. DESCRIPTION: PROCESS AS PIVOTAL FOR INCLUSION

Disadvantage is not a fixed or easily identifiable phenomena. Moreover, it is complex. Similarly, inclusion cannot be 'reached' once and for all; changing societal, ideological, structural etc. conditions and perspectives enable us to continuously recognize inequalities and exclusion practices that were previously not yet identified or were only recently generated anew due to arising societal, technological, political and other conditions. Advantage/Disadvantage and inclusion/exclusion are therefore phenomena that are space- and time-specific. It occurs in a specific society at a specific time and place, so the phenomena should constantly be observed and addressed, as they change and arise anew.

2.3.2. RECOMMENDATIONS: PROCESSES THAT FOSTER INCLUSION

In all design of policies and guidelines, decision-making and implementation of policies, the University provides access and strives to involve all stakeholders, and particularly already identified disadvantaged populations, as members who are experts with experience.

To uphold principles of inclusion, the University develops and regularly updates policies, that support inclusion, accelerate access and prevent exclusion, and makes sure they are appropriately implemented.

Design of guiding principles and measures should be a participatory process involving multiple mechanisms for input, and afforded ample time to be appropriately consulted and developed.

Some of the central areas to be scrutinized involve: teaching, research, knowledge transfer, human resources, internationalisation, social responsibility, recruitment and employment. These should continuously be monitored and evaluated against the principles of inclusion, in order also to be improved.

2.3.3. EXAMPLES OF RELEVANT PROCESSES

Examples from the six EUTOPIA universities of how information from stakeholders can be obtained, involve organizing conferences, setting up advisory committees, working groups, discussion groups and open forums, interviewing representatives from different stakeholder groups (administrative

staff, teaching, research staff, students, alumni, external experts and community members), including wider community members.

A continued and long-term approach would also be to introduce a section on experience of disadvantage and exclusion / inclusion in University life, in the student evaluation forms, as well as regularly surveying the staff as well.

2.4. UNIVERSITY BODIES AND ACTIONS

2.4.1. DESCRIPTION: BODIES AND ACTIONS NECESSARY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Different university bodies assure that laws, guidelines and principles related to inclusion are implemented throughout the University. Universities should provide opportunities to students and staff for consultations, proposals and complaints. Awareness raising among staff and students (for example through trainings) is crucial. At all times, all students and staff should also be informed of available services, their rights, as well as obligations and standards of conduct.

2.4.2. RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW TO SUPPORT INCLUSION?

To enhance inclusion, it must be supported and monitored on different levels, with the help of different bodies. These must include consultation and advisory bodies, implementation bodies, information and awareness raising bodies, research and monitoring bodies, as well as complaints bodies.

Information should be available online at all times as well as in face-to-face interaction, workshops etc.

Services and adaptations should regularly be evaluated to ensure they are up- to-date and relevant to their users.

2.4.3. EXAMPLES OF BODIES AND ACTIONS

Examples of bodies

Some of the examples from EUTOPIA Universities involve bodies, that are named: Equality unit (advisory function, developing Equality plan, coordination of specific actions; dealing with enquiries and complaints; organizing awareness raising activities); Widening access and participation team/working group (coordination and support for operations, initiating collaboration with external stakeholders and society, develop tools and methods for inclusion, raising awareness), University Community Assistance Service; Study Guidance centre; University mediator; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team; Student unions.

Examples of support services and actions for students (and staff)

The EUTOPIA universities offer a wide array of support services related to the needs of students (and staff) with different Support in adaptation to university life: psychological counselling; support in international mobility; financial support (scholarships, grants, housing, meals etc.); services in safety and accessibility; support in educational process for persons with disabilities (specific adaptations of various kinds) ; tailored support and informing students (and staff) of their rights and responsibilities; availability of teacher-mentors for students with special educational needs; socio-legal support; targeted study support for students with special needs; extended Library Support; Universal access to computer software for reading and writing; language advising for all students (and staff); study guidance and career counselling for all students; student health services; welcome services for international students (and staff), etc.

Specifically staff-oriented support

Specific staff-oriented support is linked to employment opportunities, work adaptations, rehabilitation, occupational health services, pedagogical development support and trainings of staff.

Examples of inclusive practices involve: inclusive language in job adverts; making the selection procedure and interview are "bias proof"; focusing on changing the procedures rather than the mindset of people to ensure structural change; gender mainstreaming; support for parents; support for mental welfare and physical welfare at work.

3. L i t e r a t u r e

Naylor, R. & Mifsud, N. (2020). Towards a structural inequality framework for student retention and success, Higher Education Research & Development, 39(2), 259-272, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2019.1670143

3. L i t e r a t u r e